DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 102 585 CS 201 880

AUTHOR Huntsman, Jeffrey F.
TITLE The Problems of Translation.
PUB DATE Nov 74
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Association (16th, St. Louis, Missouri, Oct. 31-Nov. 2, 1974); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC Not Available from EDRS. PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *American Indian Culture; *American Indian Languages; *American Literature; *Cultural Context; Cultural Differences; Poetry; Social Values; *Translation

ABSTRACT

The problems confronting the translator of American Indian literature are immense. The history of European Indian relations has obscured many original Indian values and attitudes and has substituted a set of simplistic and unreal Anglo attitudes that translators must transcend. Unlike most Western literature, Indian literature does not instruct, but instead celebrates and invokes. In searching for the essence of a piece, the translator must choose between satisfying the requirement to preserve the literal content of the work and satisfying the requirement that the translation convey the spirit of the original. Translation of native American literature usually requires either a native sensitivity to the work or the aid of a native informant. Indian poetry is typically spare and even the lengthy and complex Navajo chantways abound with rarified and elusive symbolism which seems to defy elegant translation. Compounding the semantic problems is the fact that most Indian literature has an intimate place in a large context of ceremony that cannot be reproduced in print at all. The inflections of song and the rhythms of drum and dance are impossible to replicate and usually lead translators to radically alter the form and even content of the Indian originals. (TS)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED102585

BEST

BEST AVAILABLE COPY

MIDWEST MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

Forum: The Study of American Indian Literature

The Problems of Translation

Jeffrey F. Huntsman
Indiana University

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL BY MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jeffrey F. Huntsman

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

The true and lasting treasure of every human community lies in its words. While the graves of Mycenae yield up their splendid contents, the golden masks are mute--timeless and magnificent, but as empty, as alien, and ultimately as profoundly frightening as the mouths of the Stonehenge trilithons. But in words is power and strength and wealth, and only the man without a song is truly poor and alone. Until recently, the native American has been treated as if he were a man, not just without a treasure in words, but almost as without words of any kind. The image of the stoic redskin is most obviously a staple of Anglo linguistic and cinematic literature, but even in historical studies, particularly those which attempt to chart the intricacies of Indian-Anglo relations, the Indian is nearly a fantoccino, a passive object to be transformed, destroyed, pitied, catalogued, and finally, sadly but safely, mourned. The Indian is too often Unperson, dead or assimilated, defamed as ruthless, depraved, nomadic, and now, most cruely, as a shiftless welfare sponge, drunkenly awaiting the monthly check from the BIA.

Although the particular charges have changed over the years since the White European invaded the Western Hemisphere, the maligning of the native American through omission and commission, whether deliberate or mistaken, has not. In the earliest contacts the Indian was seen either as a simple, Rousseauean pure being or as a subhuman savage: in our literature these types are represented by Chateaubriand's Atala and Shakespeare's Caliban. During the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, the Indian came to be seen as a savage for the simple reason that, as the Anglo population grew and expanded inland, it consumed more and more Indian land, a process that the Indian quite naturally resented and resisted. Savages were savages because they were not civilized, and the uncivilized could obviously have not true culture. However good, even idyllic, their life might seem, it was still a savage life, a life that abounded in natural and therefore good virtues. The dilemma for the Christian American, then--and all Americans who wielded power were by definition Christian Americans--was how to reconcile the God-given moral and intellectual virtues that the preChristianized Indian, like the prelapsarian Adam, had in fruitful and natural abundance. The solution Americans found characterized

05 201 880

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the entire American experience: Progress.

> ...the Indian was the remnant of a savage past away from which civilized men had struggled to grow. To study him was to study the past. To civilize him was to triumph over the past. (Roy Harvey Pearce, Savagism and Civilization. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965:49)

Once Indian cultures were destroyed, or thought to be, it was possible to study the pieces, to pity, and to comprehend. Anthropologists and apologists could safely talk about the native American without a fear that he might reappear on the doorstep. These later discussions usually take one of several common forms, but each says more about Anglo perspectives on Indians than about Indian perspectives on Anglos or Indian on Indians. Common, especially in public school texts, is the "contributions" approach where the gifts of Indian life are listed: moccasins, medicine, crops, inventions, politics, ecology ("ecological man" has recently replaced "marginal man" and "noble savage" as an Indian sobriquet), tribalism, and the names of natural features, cities, and states. Another approach is the "great men" or "hero" approach which considers the so-called political leaders who worked in the Indian cause. Yet another approach, more common recently, involves Anglo self-flagellation, the "fraudulent treaty" or "unjust deposition" approach. And finally, there is the "wilderness poet" approach which finds a tranquilly recollecting rhymer in every tree. What is wrong about all these ways of considering the American Indian is that they all presuppose Anglo values. The "contributions" are meant to upgrade Indians in Anglo eyes. The "great men" require a cultural identity and an assumption about the identical function of certain types of leaders in both cultures. The "fraudulent treaty" assumes identical legal values for both groups and a predisposition towards Anglo guilt. And the "wilderness poet" finds an unctuous moper, plucking the same chordæ cordis as Longfellow and Southey. Even when the attributes of Indian culture and personality are presented as worthy of respect and even emulation, they are so frequently taken out of context, viewed as "Indian," not Ute, or Dakota, or Malecite, that they are nearly meaningless for any but Anglos.

But culture is not artifacts or history. It is a congeries of mental constructs which describes how men think or evaluate, and only secondarily how they act. Indeed, culture is more restrictive than that: it is only those aspects of thinking that are shared by a community, that are publically acknowledged, overtly or covertly, as meaningful. Between Anglo and Indian cultures are rather striking differences in the organization and importance of things. For us, life consists of encounters with relative strangers, lasting a few moments or months. We invest ourselves in our independent histories and are so acutely aware of our personal uniqueness that a sense of community is usually impossible, unless it centers on a largely unsatisfying totemic label like linguist, Texan, Jew. But for Indian people, as for other small, stable societies, the culture frames a

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

coherent network of reciprocal relationships. In the order of organisms, individuals are born, live some brief term, and die, leaving the enduring system of organization essentially unaltered. Since we Anglos value the innovative above the traditional, both personally and societally, we reveal ourselves in our literature as individuals, nakedly but proudly, whether that literature is purportedly personal (lyric) or societal (epic). The poet is inventor, creating a purposefully unique artifact. For the native American, however, the self is unobtrusive and its art in words is paradoxically private and public at the same time. Although Indian poetry is "owned" by its maker and this ownership is recognized even long generations after its maker is dead and his name forgotten, it is the immediate and intimate possession of all who know it. Its owner is both creator and audience, the audience likewise creator and owner. Since it is shared, Indian literature does not instruct but, like the more familiar sacred literature of Western Europe, celebrates and invokes. Even the most individualistic experiences, the vision quests of the peoples of the High Plains, were truly meaningful and powerful only when they had been remade in song. The truth of the vision quest, in other words, was not realized, for the quester or his community, until it had been "published."

Here in these fundamentally different cultural realities lies the prime and most vexing problem in translating Indian literature. In searching for the essence of a piece, the translator must choose between satisfying the requirement to preserve the literal content of the work, neither adding concepts or images perhaps implicit in the original and unconsciously inferred by the native speaker/hearer nor deleting "useless" repetitions or "blatant" commonplaces that surprise and tire the English reader, and satisfying the requirement that the translation convey the spirit of the original. Good translation of any literature requires a native or near-native sensitivity to both languages and few translators have the foresight to request a bilingual birth. Even on the apparently simplest level of language, the issues are far from clear. The Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, that the normal categories, relations, and collocations of a person's language influence to a large degree what he may perceive, is useful in some measure. But an outsider can make too much of a given phrasing because he fails to understand fully the force--or lack of force--the phrase may have for its ordinary user. To cite a set of trivial but effective examples: If we compare French J'ai faim (lit. 'I have hunger') with Irish Tá ocras orm (lit. 'It is hunger on me') and English I am hungry, should we dwell on the imagistic effectiveness of the Irish phrase, the intimate identification of person and plight of the English, or the subtle and philosophical detachment of the French? And what then should we make of the Navajo, which translates literally 'Hunger is killing me'? Such pretty judgments would be utterly foolish, of course, because each phrase is the most commonplace formulation available and invokes not the tiniest frisson of poetic delight in a native speaker. Translation is possible with the aid of a native informant, to be sure, but the translator must at least know which questions to

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ask. Indian poetry is typically spare and even the lengthy and complex Navajo chantways abound with rarified and elusive symbolism which seems to defy elegant translation. The inherent differences between languages, combined with symbolism, figurative or metaphoric manipulation of ordinary language, secret or esoteric language, and fossils of earlier, now archaic language, all contribute to a maddening Arabesque of meaning that only the most perceptive and careful translator should confront.

Compounding these semantic tangles is the fact that most Indian literature has an intimate place in a larger context of ceremony that cannot be reproduced in print at all. The inflections of song, the rythyms of drum and dance, the delicate and insubstantial gestures of the teller, are impossible to replicate in the most careful of explanatory notes, and it is this inability to provide the echoes of longhouse, lodge, or hogan that has led translators like Jerome Rothenberg to alter radically the form and even content of the Indian originals. Much has been written about the deficiencies of such an approach to translation (most recently, to my knowledge, in William Bevis' fine College English article [vol. 35.693-703, March 1974] on "American Indian Verse Translations") and those of you who have searched for texts to teach or simply to read will need no further examples. But, as a practical matter, Rothenberg's "total translations" can be very useful. Most of us who teach Native American literature find our classes filled with the scions of the white middle class who typically have little acroamatic experience. Having the class divide into groups and chant Rothenberg's versions of the Seneca Idos songs, say, will hardly wing them away to the council fire, but it may give them some idea of what it means to be part of small, coherent, and esoteric group, participating in a meaningful community event.

T
h
e
The animals are coming by
n
i
m
a
l
s

H E H E H H E H
H E H E H H E H
H E H U H H E H
H E H E H H E H
H E H E H H E H

(Shaking the Pumpkin, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972, p.16)

Rothenberg admits to remaking the poems:

> translation makes a poem in this place that's analogous in whole or in part to a poem in that place. The more the translator can perceive of the original--not only the language but, more basically perhaps, the living voice of the singer--the more of it he should be able

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> to deliver. In the same process he will be presenting something--i.e, making something present, or making something as a present--for his own time and place. ("Total Translation," Stony Brook 3/4.301, 1969)

Until recently, of course, Indian literature was exclusively oral--formulated, communicated, and preserved in the spoken, chanted, and sung word, and that compelling quality can still be evoked by translations that fail on scholarly or critical grounds, if they are sung. Rothenberg's versions of Frank Mitchell's Horse Songs are engrossing, however little they sound like the Navajo originals, and there is much to be gained from the excitement they generate.

One final matter: the distinction usually carefully made in studies of Western literature between poetry and prose, no less than that made between poetry and song, blurs into virtual insignificance. As Frederic Webb Hodge noted,

> Prose rituals are always intoned, and the delivery brings out the rhythmic character of the composition. Rituals that are sung differ from those that are intoned in that the words, in order to conform to the music, are drawn out by vowel prolongations. If the music is in the form of a chant, but little adjustment is required beyond the doubling or prolongation of the vowels; but if the music is in the form of the song, the treatment of the words is more complex; the musical phrase will determine the length of a line, and the number of musical phrases in the song the number of stanzas. . . . In many of these [other, secular] songs the words are few, but they have been carefully chosen with reference to their capability of conveying the thought of the composer in a manner that, to the native's mind, will be poetic, not prosaic. (Handbook of the American Indians North of Mexico, Washington, D. C.: Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 30)

This high, oral art has dimensions that involve factors like memorization, intonation, precision, brevity, inflection, rhythm, pace, and dramatic effect. Even those pieces that most closely correspond to our Western folktales tend to be repeated with few variations from telling to telling or even teller to teller. By way of example and conclusion, I would like to quote some rarities: recent and excellent translations of living Indian literature. The three poems quoted here are from a series called the "Wishing Bone Cycle." They were related, on several occasions in virtually identical forms, by Jacob Slowstream, Swampy Cree, in Cree, mixed with some Ojibwa. The translator, Howard Norman, now a member of the Michigan Society of Fellows at the University of Michigan, is an urban Cree who has learned Cree as a second language. For the first I give the Cree in the translator's transcription and literal translation.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

kōo ché ho	I try
púko sey eémo	making wishes
kwu és kun	right way right
se púko eme místik	then I wished a-tree
otitupú stáo	upside down
wutikwun kwasakána okapíse	branches [turned-into] roots
ochapikése	roots
akóspe unikwuchos	then the-squirrels
koónechemutinéswe	[went-needing-to] ask
nuspatinískwe	moles
tannése nuhukiáno pátchenetuchéwato	how do we dig-travel down
ewéque washkúhikun	to [get] home
payakwúhe nikótoo ipoestéyek ooenetispéte	one-time happened that-way
uyaokutáhto nikóhtoo kiséw	[also] then there was a time
kiskískew puyúta mosis toník	I remember it [clearly]
se púko eme tiníte utitopu stao	I wished a-man upside down
wey otúan elísheek	his feet [turned-into] his hands
wayoisteew otúan pawtawseo	
ewapun kakésa páyaw	[and] in the-morning
otúan muskísm koonechemutinéswe	his shoes had to ask
ake payásew	the-birds
tannese yasépu yehoo washkúhikun	how do we fly up to [get] home
payakwúhe nikótoo ipoestéyek ooenetispéte	one-time happened that-way

1. I try to make wishes right
Once I wished a tree upside down
and its branches were the roots
and all the squirrels
had to ask the moles
how do we dig down there
to get home?

One time it happened that way.

Then there was the time
oh I remember now
I wished a man upside down
and his feet were his hands
and in the morning
his shoes had to aks the birds
how do we fly up there
to get home?

One time it happened that way.

In the telling of this poem, only the intimacy varied: once Jake changed "a man" to "my brother."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

11. A snake lost his eyes once.
Don't blame this one on me!
It was the snowy owl
he was playing the moon.
That owl closed his eyes
and sat in the fog tree
with his white face.
The snake looked up through the fog
and saw that round face
and said "Moon, show me a meal."
Then that moon came down and took his eyes.

The final narrative of the cycle, number 16 in Norman's versions, gathers the wishing bone together with the other birdbones and the feathers, and they all fly south for the winter. Norman comments:

> The ice trees refers to the story of what happens, according to the Cree, to the trees in winter. It is believed that the trees turn to ice in the winter. Then in spring they all turn back into trees, except for one. This one tree melts into the water that will provide nourishment for all the new-born of the earth.

16. I see you bird bones
and you better get up and back together.
Where are the feathers?
It's cold
and my teeth are rattling the rest of me
and the ice trees are coming
and the weasel has his snow
all over him already.
I said this at the beginning of winter.
I found those other bones
lying there
and leaped in with them.
Then we walked around looking for the feathers.
I had my sack of old wishes with me.
Then we found the feathers
they were on a little tree
that had no leaves
and trying to make it fly.
Ha! they thought those twigs were bones!
Then all the feathers
leaped on us
and we flew south.
This is what happened.
This is how I went to make wishes
somewhere else.
I brought my sack of old wishes with me.

Sixteen poems of the cycle appeared in Alcheringa 5.112-19 (1973).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The problems confronting the translator of American Indian literature are immense. The history of European-Indian relations has obscured many original Indian values and attitudes and substituted a set of simplistic and unreal Anglo attitudes that translators must transcend, both for themselves and for their audiences. The linguistic differences posed by widely divergent languages and the particular psychological character of Indian cultures, the elliptical austerity of a closely-shared world-view and the natural refinement, complexity, and reserve of highly-developed art forms--all make access to the world of the native American difficult. But good translation, faithful to the original and moving in the result, is possible, as Howard Norman's "Wishing Bone Cycle" and Dennis Tedlock's Finding the Center: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians (New York: Dial, 1972) show. The effort required is great but clearly worth it. For the state of human being is an idea, an idea which he has of himself. Only when he is embodied in an idea and the idea is realized, as in language, can man take possession of himself. Man then realizes his humanity most fully in such art and traditional art becomes the moral summation of a people.